

3.0 Consultation and Coordination, Public Involvement

This section describes activities for public involvement conducted during the NFFR Corridor Study process. The process was designed to be inclusive, comprehensive, open, transparent, and continuous throughout. The activities were designed to maximize public and agency comments. Activities included stakeholder interviews and two public open house meetings, and were supported by informational newsletters, an informational web site, local and state-wide press releases, and public correspondence as needed. A mailing list was created to communicate with elected officials, landowners, stakeholders, and other interested parties.

3.1 Public Information Meeting #1, April 20, 2010

The goals of the first public meeting for the NFFR Corridor Study were:

- To inform the public of the corridor study and to explain how their input is needed to identify issues along the corridor.
- To obtain a better understanding of the roadway users, local interest of the road and future needs of the corridor.
- To address questions about the corridor study area, goals of the study and potential improvements for the roadway.
- To provide education about corridor planning in general and specifically how it applies to this study.

Meeting Description and Context

Flathead County requested an informal open house to begin the meeting followed by a formal presentation given by the study team. The county also recommended that a question and answer period be facilitated to generate public participation and address any issues or concerns. The meeting followed the recommendations of Flathead County.

The meeting was held from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. at Columbia Falls City Hall in the Council Chambers, 130 6th Street West. Those in attendance included North Fork Flathead Road property owners, business owners, residents of Columbia Falls and Polebridge, and representatives from special interest groups. Copies of the sign-in sheets are included in the Appendix A as part of the meeting notes.

Public Notification

Letters were sent to property owners two weeks before the meeting. Additional notification was sent out by MDT's Public Involvement office in a state-wide press release, notification was posted on the study website, and paid advertising was placed in the Kalispell Daily Inter Lake and The Hungry Horse News:

- **The Kalispell Daily Interlake** is published daily. Two ads ran—Sunday, April 4 and 18, 2010.
- **The Hungry Horse News** is published on Wednesdays. Two ads ran—Thursday, April 1 and 15, 2010.

A copy of the approved ad is in Appendix A—Consultation and Coordination, Public Involvement.

Meeting Format

The doors opened 30 minutes before the formal presentation to allow the public to view maps and find their seats. The presentation was followed by a question and answer session. Then the

public was encouraged to provide written comments on comment forms. There were 73 people that signed in and 22 written comments were received at the meeting.

A formal PowerPoint presentation was given by the PB project manager with assistance from Commissioner Dupont, Flathead County and MDT. The PowerPoint presentation served as a guide for discussion, to provide information, and to stimulate public participation. A copy of the PowerPoint presentation is included in Appendix A. The public provided comments and participated in the discussion. Following the presentation the meeting was opened to questions where study staff members were available to answer questions and assist with gathering comments. A summary of the comments, questions and answers follows below.

Handouts provided to the public at the meeting include a meeting agenda, a corridor study area map, and comment forms. A copy of the meeting agenda handout is included in Appendix A.

Meeting Summary

This synopsis of transcribed verbal comments and questions is from the April 20, 2010 public meeting; full write-up of these comments are captured in the meeting minutes and are part of Appendix A.

The most frequent concern raised was roadway dust and the potential driving hazards it poses, including: requirements for drivers to travel at slower speeds, speed limit enforcement or lack thereof, reduced visibility, impacts on air and water quality, impacts to view shed and recreation.

Remarks regarding the timeliness of emergency service response to the community of Polebridge and other residents north of the corridor study area were discussed. Some of those who expressed concerns related to safety said they think that paving the gravel portions of the road will improve the unsafe road conditions they see. These include washboard driving surface, dust, and overall slow driving conditions, which the residents feel are causing delays for emergency services.

Other comments requested that the study look at ways to minimize the potential for wildlife impacts including collisions in the corridor and expressed concern that if the gravel roadway sections are paved the increased speed will result in unsafe conditions for wildlife and motorists. Many stated that traffic is increased in the summer with GNP tourists coming from Camas Road.

Several participants were unclear about the ownership/jurisdiction and which entity is responsible for maintenance of the roadway within the corridor study area. A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) document and a map of this were prepared and made available on the study website. The FAQs and map will help clarify roles and responsibilities.. Others pointed out that the roadway was too wide and this adds to the roadway maintenance expenses.

Columbia Falls' Mayor submitted a proclamation at the meeting advocating roadway improvements including paving of the gravel portion of the roadway in the corridor study area.

Many comments included discussion of the recent compact passed in February 2010. This compact was signed by Montana Governor Schweitzer and British Columbia Premier Gordon Campbell. It is a comprehensive "memorandum of understanding". This document will halt ongoing exploration work and prohibit future development in the Canadian river valleys north of Glacier National Park. This compact addresses limits on development of oil and gas and mining. This led to discussion of economics and concerns raised around this issue, including balancing demands on this ecosystem, future development, tourism, and distribution of taxes for all the county roads, not just NFFR.

All participants were encouraged to visit the study website as it was updated and were advised that they will be informed of additional ways to participate in the process.

3.2 Issues and Comments by the Public

Although the Study Team asked for and encouraged input on road issues, the general public offered polarizing solutions of “pave” and “do not pave.” The public then provided issues, concerns and opinions about their choice of solution. The following issues, ideas and statements were identified as a result of written comments.

Against paving because it will create these issues:

- Promote development, overpopulation, commercialization, speeding, increased traffic, increase in visitors, noise and trash, habitat modification; additional dangers to threatened and endangered species, increase in illegal poaching, wildlife/vehicle collisions.
- Negatively impact wildlife safety and health, water quality, Grizzly bear safety and health, the environment overall, stream habitat, quality of life, this area being the “last best special place”, could impact the BC negotiations, historic character, the remoteness of the area, unknown impacts with paving, increase or cause ecological problems, pollution from runoff (into river and streams) if paved, the remoteness of this area, values, the character of northern communities.

For paving because it will offer these benefits:

- Create employment, local business economic boost, economic benefits (of creating an) alternative route for visitors (to GNP), help Border Patrol, USPS, improve emergency response.
- Eliminate/reduce dust pollution to people, animals, plants and trees, visibility, air and water quality, health and safety issues, dust impacts on the Clean Air Act, issues to vehicles due to washboard conditions, road ruts and potholes due to standing water and poor drainage.
- Expand scenic opportunities.

Suggestions that were given included, proper gravel and dust abatement measures, improve safety and reduce dust by narrowing road, crowning, suggest dust coat, improve and maintain the gravel and enforcing speed limit, other improvements, like grading or dust mitigation, consider oil treatment, use non-paving alternatives to (improve) road, improvements to the entire NF to the border, re-gravel, consider oil treatment if paving is not an option, grading not enough, law enforcement and more signage to reduce speeding, guardrails are needed (north of the corridor study area).

The following list of issues and concern statements are those made as comments from members of the public and may or may not be accurate representations, based on analysis related to the NFFR corridor study area.

Issues, Concerns and Questions from the Public:

- NF is a gem biologically.
- Pave other roads that have more use/traffic where it would be a better use of the money, lack of traffic to justify paving NFFR.
- Keep wild and natural.
- As roads are paved in GNP why not here?
- Another entrance to GNP not needed; some improvement without paving needed.

- Driving dirt road part of what makes spending time in area nice experience.
- There are high traffic counts.
- Character/natural beauty authentic Montana important to locals and the world.
- (With the) 1980s widening proposal it was determined to have environmental impact on wildlife, (so again) paving won't progress beyond courts.
- Address walking/biking safety.
- How does siltation impact fish quality in NF River? How does paving impact grizzlies?
- Development not issue because of limited private land, zoning and septic tank permits.
- This is un-maintainable section of road because road is too wide.
- If 19 environmental groups suing, why do this study?
- Need consistency in decision-making process; road dangerous-dust, lack of maintenance, high traffic, too high costs to maintain dirt road.
- Pave the bottom portion and turn it over to the state to maintain.
- Polebridge to Canadian Border is really bad.
- Non-paved road has kept land and animals intact.
- ALERT (Advanced Life Support and Emergency Rescue Team) is too expensive.
- Should focus on drainage issues before considering paving.
- Do realistic economic analysis -road dollars would be better spent elsewhere.
- Zone adjacent private properties to alleviate concerns about development.
- British Columbia/Montana Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).
- Support reduced speeds.
- Use the money for the study to improve the road instead.
- Dust is a natural ingredient-paved road materials are not natural to the environment.

Summary of Public's Issues and Concerns

Some members of the public indicated that paving is necessary to decrease dust and improve health and safety.

Some members of the public indicated that paving would devastate the natural and scenic beauty of the area and is not necessary. They recommended:

- Crowning the road.
- Narrowing the road.
- Using dust control methods.

Some members of the public said using tax payers dollars to pave this roadway is not a good use of the money when there are hundreds of miles of unpaved roads in Flathead County, many of which have higher traffic volumes.

3.3 Stakeholder Interviews

Stakeholder interviews began in May. This allowed the study team to better understand the issues and concerns with the study corridor roadway from the stakeholders' perspective. The following describes the process that occurred to accomplish this task.

Stakeholder Interview Description

Stakeholders were individually chosen as a representative for a community sub-group for which they are a member or a leader. These sub-groups include representatives from the business community, the environmental community, the local government and the community at-large. Interviews were conducted by telephone.

Goals of the Stakeholder Interviews

- To inform the stakeholders of the study and to explain how their input is needed to identify issues specific to them or the group they represent.
- To obtain a better understanding of the stakeholder interest of the current roadway, and their future needs of the corridor.
- To discuss potential improvements for the roadway.

Results

In general most of the stakeholder interview results reflect what the study team has heard in comments received during the April 20 meeting or from website, email and US mail. However, stakeholders offered more depth and explanation in this format. The summary of all stakeholder interviews and individual verbatim interviews can be found in Appendix A.

The most frequently cited concerns for travel and safety on the roadway were the condition of the roadway with washboard surface, potholes resulting from poor drainage, and dust.

The need for expedited travel for emergency service vehicles for increasing number of visitors to the area, concerns for preservation of the natural character of the area, not impacting wildlife, fragmenting habitat, creating more impacts to the natural environment including degrading water and air quality and maintaining the values of Glacier National Park with any roadway improvement were other common concerns discussed during the interviews.

A few stakeholders asked to remain anonymous. The following list identifies the role the person has and the group or association they represent. The Stakeholders listed in Table 3.1, Stakeholders/Organizations, were interviewed for the Study:

Table 3.1 – Stakeholders/Organizations

Role/Title	Association
President and Vice President	North Fork Land Owners Association
Key Staff	Fire Department and Emergency Services
Representative	National Parks Conservation Association
Individual	Property Owner
Senior Command	U.S. Border Patrol
Trail Manager	Recreational Trails, Department of Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks
Leader Member	National Resource Defense Council
Tour Manager	Adventure Cycling
Leader Member	North Fork Preservation Association
Leader Member	North Fork Compact
Member	North Fork Coalition for Health and Safety
Key Staff	Columbia Falls Chamber of Commerce
Owners	Guides and Rafting Outfitters
City Official	City of Columbia Falls

3.4 Resource Agency Meeting

A resource agency meeting was held April 21, 2010. Complete meeting notes can be found in Appendix A.

The agency meeting provided an opportunity for the study team to receive input from the agencies regarding issues and concerns along the NFFR corridor study area. It also offered agencies the opportunity to provide a better understanding of land management plans or other constraints or regulations that might affect the corridor.

The Corridor Study Process overview was given by the consultant with support from MDT. A summary by the consultant's Public Involvement Coordinator of the public meeting on April 20- included the main issues and concerns raised by the public. A roundtable discussion of issues/concerns pertinent to each agency's mission and responsibilities was conducted. The website address was made available to everyone for future reference:

<http://www.mdt.mt.gov/pubinvolve/northfork>.

A corridor tour occurred for meeting attendees directly after the meeting.

3.5 Public Information Meeting #2, July 27, 2010

The goals of the second public meeting for the NFFR Corridor Study were:

- To obtain comment on the Draft Corridor Study document,
- To address questions about the corridor study area, goals of the study and potential improvement options for the roadway.

Meeting Description and Context

The purpose of the meeting was to obtain comment on the Draft Corridor Study, released for public review on July 15, 2010. The meeting was held from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. at Discovery Square in Columbia Falls, 540 Nucleus Avenue. Those in attendance included North Fork Flathead Road property owners, business owners, residents of Columbia Falls and Polebridge, and representatives from special interest groups. Copies of the sign-in sheets are included in the Appendix A.

Public Notification

Letters were sent to property owners along the corridor study area two weeks before the meeting. Additional notification was sent out by MDT's Public Involvement office in a state-wide press release, notification was posted on the study website, and paid advertising was placed in the *Kalispell Daily Inter Lake* and *The Hungry Horse News*:

- **The *Kalispell Daily Interlake*** is published daily: Two ads ran; July 11 and July 25, 2010.
- **The *Hungry Horse News*** is published on Wednesdays: Two ads ran; July 8 and July 22, 2010.

A copy of the approved ad is in Appendix A—Consultation and Coordination, Public Involvement.

Meeting Format

The meeting was conducted in an Open House format discussion. It is a method for members of the public to ask questions individually and to provide comments with a court reporter. There were 43 people that signed in; 17 people gave verbal comments to the court reporter and 13 written comments were received at the meeting.

The handouts provided to the public at the meeting include a meeting agenda, and comment forms. Copies of the meeting handouts are included in Appendix A.

Summary of Comments received at July 27 meeting

Some comments received requested that the study look more closely at ways to minimize the potential for wildlife impacts including collisions in the corridor. They also expressed concern that if the gravel roadway sections are paved the increased speed will result in unsafe conditions for wildlife and motorists. Many stated that traffic increases in the summer with GNP tourists coming from Camas Road.

Many comments included discussion of the recent compact passed in February 2010. This compact was signed by Montana Governor Schweitzer and British Columbia Premier Gordon Campbell. It is a comprehensive Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). This document is designed to halt ongoing mining, oil and gas exploration work and prohibit future development in the Canadian river valleys north of Glacier National Park.

Many comments discussed economics and concerns raised around this issue. These included balancing demands on the North Fork ecosystem, future development, tourism, and distribution of taxes for all the county roads, not just NFFR.

Summary of Comments received on the Draft after July 27 meeting

A total of 93 comments were received by the study team after the Draft was published for public review on July 15, 2010 to August 21, 2010. The public perspective gained through public involvement efforts found no agreement was attained based on the conflicting comments received. This resulted in no single option or group of improvement options emerging as a recommended priority for this corridor. Many members of the public stated that if they could not have their preferred option (for instance “pave” or “no-pave”), their preference would be to have better maintenance and if at all possible, one of the dust abatement treatment options. Several specifically stated that the study should have been a regional study to address all unpaved roads in the county, not just this stretch of roadway. Many other comments received that were directed at contents of the Draft have been addressed as appropriate within this Final version of the study. The individual comments received through August 21 are available for review on the website and on a CD as part of the Final document.

3.6 Other Public Information Efforts

The following activities were ongoing efforts to engage the public in the corridor study process:

- The study website: www.mdt.mt.gov/pubinvolve/northfork was updated as often as necessary and included corridor study area maps, study process information, meeting information, a comment form and frequently asked questions.
- A newsletter with updated study information was sent out on June 6, 2010, to everyone on the study mailing list, either by email or hardcopy. Additional copies of the newsletter were sent to the local library, the City of Columbia Falls, Flathead County, MDT Kalispell office, NFLA, and the Polebridge Mercantile.
- A second newsletter was distributed to everyone on the study mailing list. Additional paper copies were mailed to interested persons and to previously identified community locations.
- All study materials had the web address, physical address and email address to allow members of the public to provide comments to the study team easily.
- Study team staff responded to many interested members of the community by telephone and email.

The study team received 243 total comments by August 21, 2010.